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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TUNIS 000808

SIPDIS

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STATE FOR NEA/FO (GRAY), NEA/MAG (GERMAINE, LAWRENCE),
NEA/PPD (FERNANDEZ, SMITH, AGNEW), NEA/PI (MULENEX, KIRBY),
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SUBJECT: U.S./EU LUNCH ON FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IN TUNISIA

REF: 05 TUNIS 1405

Classified By: Amb. William J. Hudson; reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

1.(C) On March 22, the Ambassador hosted his EU counterparts at the latest in a series of coordination meetings between Embassy Tunis and representatives of the EU in Tunisia. At our suggestion, the topic of the luncheon meeting was "freedom of expression in Tunisia." The conversation revealed that, while there was broad consensus that such liberty was conspicuously absent in the country, there was little agreement on how best to support the cause of a free press in Tunisia. The EU Delegation Head agreed with the Ambassador that a free press is the only way to maintain social progress and that, absent a free flow of information, Tunisia's social and economic stability was at risk. The most forward-leaning of the group was the Dutch ambassador, who urged a strong stance with the GOT on freedom of the press. The most conservative reaction was from the ambassador from Austria (currently serving as the President of the EU) who claimed that the press was free except for certain "taboo issues." This view was reinforced by the French representative who argued that Tunisia enjoys some of the most liberal news coverage of societal issues in the Arab world. In a private conversation following the lunch, the EU Delegation Head agreed to consider an Embassy proposal to co-host a media event on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day, May 3, 2006. End Summary.

US/EU Ambassadors speak

2.(C) On March 22, the Ambassador hosted a lunch for the EU ambassadors in Tunisia. This meeting was the latest in a series of coordination meetings between the Embassy and the EU that often focus on a specific subject. At our suggestion, the topic for this meeting was "freedom of expression in Tunisia." In his opening remarks, the Ambassador noted that US support for liberty of expression in Tunisia was based on our belief that a free press was a basic cornerstone for any democracy. The Ambassador also explained that, in our view, a free flow of information was necessary for future social, political, and economic development in Tunisia, and that the US and EU shared a common interest in such development. The Ambassador then detailed the USG's two-pronged strategy for advancing freedom of the press in Tunisia, namely direct and frank dialogue with the GOT at the same time that we support and engage with Tunisian journalists. The Ambassador noted that we were committed to such an approach but it appeared that the GOT was unconvinced of the need to move forward in this regard.

3.(C) EU Delegation Head, Ambassador Marc Pierini, began his

intervention with an update on a 2.25 million euros program for journalists that the EU was sponsoring in Tunisia. (Reftel) Pierini noted that the program, aimed at providing training to Tunisian journalists both locally and in training centers in Europe, was perfect on paper but rather disappointing in practice. He explained that the African Center for the Perfection of Journalists and Communicators (CAPJC), the Tunisian partner in the program, was subject to intense GOT behind-the-scenes influence. Pierini noted that, since the Tunisian Ministry of Interior was playing an active role in "clearing" the names of those journalists that wished to participate in the program, many Tunisian journalists were shying away from the program. As a result, the main beneficiaries of the money were those employed by the GOT. Pierini argued that Tunisian youth had little faith in the local media, and that it would be necessary to look to the longer term for change. He agreed with the Ambassador that a free press in the country was needed for the maintenance of social progress as well as for future growth.

Broad agreement that problems exist

4.(C) Other ambassadors agreed that the situation of the press in Tunisia was troubling. The Spanish ambassador argued that "the essential truth" was that there was "no freedom of expression or freedom of the press in Tunisia." The Dutch ambassador, who is a writer with important insight into the literary scene in Tunisia, agreed that there were serious problems in Tunisia surrounding freedom of expression and the publication of books. The French representative referred to a "world of lies" in Tunisia where nothing is clear and where everybody is watching Al Jazeera for the news since it is the only credible news outlet in the eyes of most Tunisians. The German ambassador noted that there appeared

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to be a lack of political will on the part of the GOT to resolve this issue and believed that, as a result, the Tunisian society was becoming more radicalized and nationalistic.

5.(C) The ambassador of Austria (currently serving as President of the EU) maintained that the situation of the press was "not so bad." He stated that he did not believe that there was "no freedom of the press," but rather "taboo issues." While the French representative privately dismissed the Austrian ambassador's comments as uninformed due to the fact that he had not been in Tunisia long enough to understand the situation, he publicly stated that he believed the Tunisian press was notably free in its coverage of social issues.

No consensus on how to proceed

6.(C) There was wide disagreement on how best to further freedom of expression in Tunisia. The Italian ambassador believed that training was the way to go and discussed Italian initiatives in this regard. The Dutch ambassador rejected this approach noting that "Tunisian journalists are tired of being trained." and argued that "we go wrong when we don't target the government." She went on to detail her own discussions with the GOT on the issue of press freedom, but cautioned that the West should not allow itself "to be used by the opposition." The EU Delegation Head advocated a long-term strategy without specifying necessary action in this regard. The Austrian ambassador agreed that training was useful, but should be accompanied by political action, if necessary. The German ambassador argued that "we cannot hope for a step-by-step opening of the system" and that we "should be more energetic," but he also refrained from providing examples of possible action. The Spanish ambassador stated that "it is good to try to find loopholes" to support journalists, while the Swedish ambassador simply urged a "step-by-step" process.

EU to Consider Co-Sponsoring a Media Event with US Embassy

7.(C) After the lunch, US Embassy staff approached Ambassador Pierini to seek support for EU co-sponsorship of a conference in Tunis on "Press Freedom and Media Responsibility" on the occasion of the May 3 World Press Freedom Day. Pierini expressed his interest in such a joint program and asked for further information. On April 4, the Embassy forwarded a proposal for their consideration.

Comment

8.(C) Embassy officials have made clear to European counterparts our belief that a coordinated approach on the issue of freedom of the press is key to convincing the GOT of the need for reform. While it would appear that there is broad sympathy for the plight of journalists and a Tunisian society starved for unbiased information, it is clear that the EU itself is not united on how best to address this problem. The relative failure of the very expensive EU media training program for Tunisia may serve as a wake-up call to the EU membership of just how difficult the situation is for local journalists. We will continue to engage in sustained dialogue on this issue with our European partners in Tunisia to find ways to cooperate in advancing freedom of expression in this country.

HUDSON